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ABSTRACT

Blacks have spent much time and energy "filling other people's pockets" (as Margaret Walker has said) but have not addressed the needs of their own community. Black communities are in a state of deterioration for which the treatment must be self-help. In this paper the example of an unhealthy organism is used as a metaphor for prescribing a cure for the ills of the black community. The suggested remedies are educational improvements and economic development generated from inside the community. Curing the educational crisis will require: (1) courses on black history; (2) the use of church activities as a base to teach, develop skills, and engender self-confidence; and (3) the fusing of education with social activities which include African-American history as part of their agenda and which use creative approaches for presenting the material, including multi-media presentations and awards. Poor personal spending habits have caused the erosion of the economic base in the black community. To insure the stabilization and growth of the community, persons who receive their income from the community must be residents of it and those who profit from the community must reinvest 10 percent of their profits back into it. The integration of business and professional persons into the community will result in better police protection, a lower crime rate, and more quality housing, as well as providing role models and work opportunities for youth. (VM)

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PHYSICIAN, HEAL THY SELF:

A Prescription for the Recovery of the African-American Community

Presented at

THE FOURTEENTH ANNUAL NATIONAL

CONFERENCE ON THE BLACK

FAMILY IN AMERICA

Louisville, Kentucky

March, 1987

by

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For my people everywhere...lending their strength to the years,
to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years,...
dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never
understanding;

For my people...lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people
filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets
needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money
and something--something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened,
drinking when hopeless, tied and shackled and tangled
among ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us
omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies,
associations and councils and committees and conventions,
distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by
money-hungry glory-craving leeches, preyed on by facile
force of state and fad and novelty, by false prophet and
holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,...

Margaret Walker

In 1987, the bulk of the time and energy of African-Americans is still spent "filling other people's pockets". The prescribed role of the African-American in America has not changed since the first sailors of African ancestry sailed with Christopher Columbus in 1492. African slaves came to America as "Black gold," an endless supply of inexpensive "human cargo" to heal the labor pains of a newly developing nation.

Historically African-Americans have provided a vast multi-talented pool from which America has freely dipped. African-Americans have been psychologically conditioned to solve the

economic problems, meet the military needs and set the standards for excellence in entertainment and athletics in America. Although African-Americans have been conditioned to do a superb job or meeting the needs of the mainstream America, they have not been conditioned to address the needs of their own community. The African-American community has deteriorated to the point that it has been methaphorically described as being in intensive care. Without a miracle drug, its prognosis is not favorable.

Current political and economic trends clearly indicate that the cure for the African-American community's ills must be found internally. Relying on an external remedy for its recovery will be fatal to the community. In this paper the author will argue that the healing of the African-American community must be from the inside out and therefore must be done by African-American people. The author recognizes the economic and psychological obstacles which must be addressed and the time element necessary to bring about the prescribed cure, never-the-less, he perceives this prescription as a major step in the treatment which is necessary for the recovery of the African-American community. The transformation of this critically ill "patient" will require drastic measures. Webster (79) defines healing as: (1) "to grow sound", (2) "to free from grief, troubles, evil, etc.". Unless the African-American community does grow sound and is able to free itself from its grief and troubles, it will self-destruct.

As in the case of most critically ill "patients," the advanced state of deterioration of the African-American community cannot be attributed to the malfunction of a single system. The frail health of the community reflects a massive breakdown of several key systems. The interdependency of the systems has had a domino effect of the healthy on the unhealthy systems, resulting in the community's critical condition and almost total colapse.

The focus of this paper will be limited to what the author perceives as being the two systems most critical to the recovery of the community. These systems are: education, the "immune system" of the community; and economic development, the "blood" of the community. It is not the intent of the author to provide an indepth historical or sociological analysis of how the African-American community has deteriorated to its present state, but rather to focus on and provide an overview of some of the observable symptoms manifested by the community's present condition and suggest cures for these anomalies. The author recognizes the controversal nature of some of the suggested remedies, however, it is hoped that these prescriptions will serve as the foundation and catalyst for the development of effective strategies for the healing of the African-American community.

Education protects the life of the community. It encompasses both the history of the people of the community and serves as the trainer which prepares the community for the future. It is also the compass which provides the community with a sense

of direction. As the historian, education tells the community and the world what its people have done, thereby instilling a sense of pride and self respect in the community, and giving it an indication of its potential. As the trainer, it identifies the skills needed in the community and those necessary to be competitive in the main stream of American society, and adequately equips the members of the community with those skills. In addition, to providing the necessary skills, education directs the use of these acquired skills to appropriate areas of need.

The crisis in education in the African-American community is that the community has allowed the education of its youth to be handled mainly by persons outside of the community. Usually these persons possess neither the appropriate knowledge of the people of the community nor do they have a sincere interest in the community's welfare. As Carter G. Woodson (1933) observed: "The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself..."

The severity of the problem faced by African-American youth can be easily illustrated by analyzing the quality of "Black History" programs presented during the month of February in predominately white public schools and colleges. The author observed that the majority of the local public institutions had very brief programs of one hour or less or none at all. Those with expanded programs frequently had programs whose quality contributed more to the re-enforcement of stereotypes than the enhancement of knowledge of significant

contributions of African-Americans. At several of these institutions, the programs were planned by students or teachers who had little or no knowledge of African-American history. At the high school and college level, the major events for many of these programs were dances and fashion shows. The end result was that many of the students who "celebrated" "Black History Month" did so without having learned anything of significance about African- American history.

The most critical ingredient in the cure of the African-American community is the proper education of its youth. If the minds of the youth are not saved, the community will continue to die a slow and painful death. African-American youth need a strong educational antidote to neutralize the poison they recieve through the mass media. Their lack of knowledge about their history clouds their vision and perception of their potential. Such deficiencies must be treated with healthy doses of self love.

The African-American community must assure responsibility for the major share of its children's education. It must be cognizant of the fact that the appropriate education of the youth of the community is the first step in preparing them to break the tradition of "filling other people's pockets". Those outside the community understand that it is not in their best interest to educate African-American youth to become self-sufficient. Therefore, it is erroneous to assume that proper education of African-American youth is taking place in public educational institutions.

Church and social events are two major community controlled events in the African-American community with the great potential for serving as the vehicles to supplement the education of the community's youth. Both of these activities attract large numbers of youth and have the flexibility to incorporate within their existing formats important historical information and skill development actitivies.

The potential of church activities as an educational base is suggested by an informal survey, conducted by the author, of approximately 200 African-American teenagers who attended several religious denonminations. The survey revealed that the majority of the teenagers attended church to participate in activities such as singing in the choir and special programs. The participants admitted being members of one church, but frequently attending other churches which had more interesting programs. This expressed interest in being where "something is happening" suggests that even the youth who do not appear to be motivated do have a desire to be a part of what they perceive to be meaningful activities. The teenager's interest to be involved in activities creates an ideal environment in which to incorporate knowledge of African-American history. Information about the historical conditions which inspired the words of Negro spirituals and gospel songs could easily be incorporated into choir rehearsals and musical programs. This basic information could be expanded to include a broader range of African-American history and additional programs which are a part of the churches activities.

Religious activities also provide an ideal environment for the development of effective skills and self confidence, two critical areas which are seldom adequately addressed in public education. The availability of role models and teachers with whom they can identify, along with being in a supportive environment, creates the conditions for a positive educational experience. This is of particular importance for young African-American males who often have a strong self-concept, and the effective oral communication skills which are a minimum requirement for meaningful employment. The extent to which they will be able to develop these skills will be largely dependent upon their

ability to find a supportive environment in which they can be taught.

All social activities in the African-American Community should include some aspect of African-American history as a part of their agenda. Initially, to gain acceptance, these activities should be brief but incorporated into the program at strategic points which would provide exposure to the maximum number of persons in attendance. The acceptance and development of interest in these activities can be enhanced through creative non-traditional approaches for presenting the material. The use of multi-media formats and the use of awards to increase audience participation would add to the effectiveness of these activities. A major goal of the activities which cater to young audiences would be to have the youth assume a leadership role in the development of their activities, particularly through the use of drama and audio and video productions. Such activities would not only increase the participant's knowledge of their history, but it would also enhance their creative and communication skills. An essential element in all of the religious and social programs is quality. Poor and mediocre programs contribute to the deterioration of the community's condition. Quality programs foster pride and plant the seeds of self-knowledge which produces self love, the prerequisite for neighbor love. Economic development in the African-American community is contingent upon neighbor love.

Dr. Andrew Brimmer has projected that the 1986 income for Blacks will reach $203.9 billion. Despite this economic base, the African-American community is poverty stricken. It is clear that the economic crisis in the African-American community is not that the members of the community are poor, but rather that they have poor spending habits. Members of the community have been conditioned to function as funnels through which their dollars quickly pass before

being dispersed to their final destinations outside the community. This condition exists because members of the community have been conditioned to fill other people's pockets.

Economic development, the "blood" of the community, determines the quality of life. The erosion of the economic base cripples the community and sentences it to a slow and painful death. Because of the direct relationship between economic development and the "health" of the community, drastic measures must be taken to restore past losses and prevent future deterioration of the community's lifeline. In order to adequately "treat" this condition, the following rules must be observed: 1) All persons who receive the majority of their income from the community be required to live in the community; 2) All individuals and businesses who profit from operating in the community be required to reinvest a minimum of ten percent of their profits back into the community. Adhearing to these rules will insure the community's stabilization and growth.

In addition to the dollars which enter the African-American community not circulating several times before making their exit, the majority of the professionals who work in the community, also leave at the end of their work day. This mass withdrawal of persons who provide the community with essential skills and services during the day, limits the youth of the community from having the opportunity to have an on-going relationship with them. This limits the impact of these professionals as the role models and imput into community activities.

Although the demand that these professionals reside in the community may seem extreme, it is no more extreme than when General Motors or the Ford Motor Company

requiring that their executives buy and drive their cars. Rather than being an infringement upon the rights of these executives, it becomes their public endorsement of the products they produce. Such an endorsement is the most positive signal the executives could send to their employees and potential customers. Professionals who work in the African-American community and exploit its financial resources, but refuse to reside in the community where they earn their living become an additional liability to the community which they claim to serve. They join the ranks of those who are draining the community's dwindling resources while giving little in return. Attorneys, barber and beautyshop owners, dentist, grocery store owners, landlords, medical doctors, ministers and all other persons who depend on the community for their income should be residents of the community.

The most frequently heard arguments aganist residing in the African-American community focus on its high crime rate and the unavailability of quality housing. Both of these areas are legitimate concerns which can be easily addressed. The high crime rate is a reflection of poor police protection, social deterioration of the community and the residents feeling that they have little control over their environment. The integration of business and professional persons into the community who demand better police protection will result in a major drop in the crime rate. In addition, through the organization of neighborhood watch groups to prevent crime, the crime rate in the community can be reduced to a minimal level.

Quality housing can be built in the African-American community at a substantially lower cost than in more prestigious neighborhoods outside of the community. Affluent African-Americans can build their own community within the existing African-American community equipped with all of the status symbols found in homes in other middle class neighborhoods. Their new affluent

section of the community could set its own standards of luxury. One of the major advantages of having such a neighborhood in the African-American community would be to keep the dollars earned in the community circulating in the community for a longer period of time. The community's dollars must be "chewed" longer before they are swallowed. An affluent section of the community would generate additional service jobs for community residents. It would also provide African-American youth with role models in the community and the opportunity to obtain odd jobs and learn how to work, a critical skill which many African-American youth never get the opportunity to learn. It must be understood that African-American youth are often not successful when given a job because they have never been taught how to work. A person must be taught what work is and how to work. A strong middle class in the community would also up grade the property value, the quality of the local schools, community services and the community's tax base. The youth of the community would also benefit from seeing that that success is not defined as the ability to leave the community but rather as the ability to contribute to its growth.

In addition to those persons who receive the majority of their income from the African-American community, all persons or businesses who derive profits from operating the community should be required to reinvest a minimum of ten percent of their profits into community projects or services. This reinvestment would not only benefit the community but also enhance the relationship between the businesses and the residents of the community, thereby attracting additional customers to the business and creating additional jobs and activities for persons in the community.

As an additional investment in the community by all members of the community,

all social and religious events sponsored by community groups should be held in a community facility. This utilization of community facilities would result in the upgrading of the community's facilities and keep the community's dollars circulating in the community for a longer period of time. It would also increase the possibility of attracting dollars from outside of the community through the rental of the community's facilities.

The first step toward the economic "cure" of the African-American community is the most difficult. As a condition for their survival, the residents of the African-American community must demand that those persons who make profits in the community not be allowed to take all of their profits from the community, to invest them in other parts of the city without first reinvesting a part of their profits in the community in which they have been generated. Those persons who are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the community will invest in it voluntarily, those who are less sensitive to the community's needs must be informed that reinvestment in the community is the minimum requirement for doing business in the community.

The African-American community has deteriorated and will "die" if it continues to be drained of its human and economic resources. The siphoning off of the community's resources has created a void in the community that must be filled. There is nothing on the political or economic horizon which suggest that the community's ailments will be cured by external treatment. To be effectively healed and regain its pride, the African-American community must develop its own cure. It must assest its own needs and prescribe the healing process. This process must evolve from a knowledge of self and self love, a love which will help the community develop a new agenda. The healing process

will be slow. The evidence that the healing process has begun will be when when there are signs that the community has begun to reverse the conditioned role of filling other people's pockets. Physician, heal thy self.